European Journal of Studies in Management and Business

(Formerly Management and Business Research Quarterly)

2023(27)1–11

Research Article
https://doi.org/10.32038/mbrq.2023.27.01

When Branded Consumption Restores Consumers' Personal Control

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KEYWORDS

Personal Control, Branded Consumption, Attribution Theory, Inconspicuous Consumption, Signaling, Brand Management

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ABSTRACT

As natural disasters and health issues proliferate and alter life situations accordingly, individuals often experience a threat to their personal control. One of the downward coping behaviors is for one to seek structure and order in one's external environment (e.g., Kay et al., 2009). As a result, consumers alter their consumption behavior to compensate for a lower sense of personal control (e.g., Cutright, 2012). Drawing upon extant literatures of personal control, attribution theory and branded consumption, the current research offers four propositions regarding the instrumental role of branded consumption in restoring consumers' sense of personal control. The research advances business practitioners' understanding about consumers' coping behavior to overcome perceived loss of control. It sheds light on a novel motivation behind branded consumption and thus, helps shape branding and merchandising practices to empower consumers with innovative brand offerings.

Pursuing a sense of personal control is one of the major human motivations (Kay et al., 2009). Individuals constantly seek comfort and assurance from a feeling that they are able to influence external situations and steer their social encounters (Kay et al., 2009; Stollberg et al., 2017). The feeling of control is critical for the mental health and development of human beings and thus, people continuously make efforts to avoid randomness and chaos (Lerner, 1980). Seeing the connection between one's action and external outcome prevents the unpleasant feeling of randomness and as a result, helps restore a sense of a meaningful life (Greenaway et al., 2014; Kay et al., 2008). Recent research suggests that maintaining a sense of personal control over environment facilitates goal-directed activities (Kay et al., 2014), enhances one's satisfaction of

Received 06 June 2023; Received in revised form 21 July 2023; Accepted 30 July 2023

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life (Knight & Haslam, 2010; Creed et al., 2012), as well as increases productivity and efficiency in one's daily task performance (Rodin & Langer, 1977). However, people often experience their life situations out of their personal control. For example, COVID pandemic presents an unprecedented threat to one's sense of personal control due to institutionalized anti-pandemic measures which restrict one's involvement in decision-making processes (Wieczorek et al., 2022) and reduce social contacts compromising one's control over the physical and social boundaries (Burn, 2021). A lowered sense of personal control during the COVID pandemic is positively associated with psychological distress (Karademas & Thomadakis, 2021), an increased depression rates (Msetfi et al., 2022), inhibits goal-pursuit behavior (Clayton McClure & Cole, 2022) as well as reduces optimism toward life situations among adolescents (Wieczorek et al., 2022). In general, anxiety and depression increase when people feel external situations are out of their control (Skinner, 1996; Abramson et al., 1978).

How would consumers respond after they experience a threat to their personal control? Recent consumer research demonstrates a variety of behavioral patterns among consumers who are confronted with a loss of control. For example, consumers who experience a loss of control become more stringent when they are evaluating brand extensions (Cutright et al., 2013), prefer the product designs which clearly define the borderlines of products over those which do not (Cutright, 2012), choose more high- than low-effort products (Cutright & Samper, 2014), generate more optimistic expectation on financial outcomes (Blair, 2016), and are more appealed to cognitively fluent brand offerings (Blair, 2020). In summary, consumers who experience a loss of control are motivated to seek a perception of non-randomness and order in the consumption environment. Different from extant control literature, the current research proposes an understudied consequence in consumers' branded consumption.

A threat to personal control is a perception of compromised agency of oneself in external outcomes. Externality of outcomes could be further divided into two dimensions: self-contingency and self-causality (Rothbaum et al., 1982). In other words, one with a lower sense of personal control may perceive that external outcomes are neither contingent on (self-contingency) nor caused by oneself (self-causality). Previous research did not differentiate behavioral outcomes according to which dimension of externality compromises under a loss of control. In other words, extant literature examines the behavioral consequence mainly from a general sense of loss of control without factoring in differences in the attribution process about the loss of control. In the current research, we posit that low-control consumers' branded consumption will differ as a function of whether they attribute the loss of control internally or externally.

Literature review

Personal control threat and coping systems

Individuals strive to maintain their illusion of non-randomness because a perception of a world distributing success and misfortune haphazardly provokes stress and anxiety (Lerner, 1980). To avoid chaos and randomness, people either rely on their primary control system to reestablish the order of the environment or develop a perceptually adaptive system to compensate for a loss of

control (i.e., compensatory control system) (Rothbaum et al., 1982; Kay et al., 2009). In general, culture, experience, or context will determine which means that people use to reestablish order (Kay et al., 2009). Individuals may pull in their primary control system by directly changing the situation in focus. Alternatively, they may resort to compensatory control strategies. For example, individuals show more sensitivity to patterns out of random stimuli to achieve an illusory control (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008), give more support to the incumbent government, show a stronger need to justify the system (Kay et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2004), and believe in a controlling God more than God as a creator (Kay et al., 2008).

Individuals' need to restore compensatory control is often manifested through their possessions. Possessions are often perceived by consumers as extended self (Belk, 1988, 2013). Consumers' psychological needs shape their perception of products (e.g., Belk, 1998; 2013). When they experience a loss of control, consumers prefer a clearer structure and borderlines in product design (Cutright, 2012), a more narrowly defined category of branded product offerings (Cutright et al., 2013), the stocks with easy-to-pronounce ticker symbols (Blair, 2020) as well as the products which require more effort from consumers to deliver the desirable benefits (Cutright & Samper, 2014).

Despite a good portion of consumer research examining compensatory control strategies, few research explores how branded consumption such as brand logos help restore a sense of personal control among consumers. In the next section, we will delineate why explicitness of brand logos may be instrumental for low-control consumers to restore a sense of order and non-randomness.

The instrumental role of branded consumption in restoring a sense of control

One way of placing order and structure in the outside world is to resort to a 'larger' self. The 'larger' self could be the force behind sociopolitical institutions, superstitions of all kinds, and heavenly figures etc. For example, individuals with a lower sense of control offer more support for governmental control (Kay et al., 2008). To maintain or restore a sense of order, people, in one way, engage themselves in a variety of rituals which exist pervasively in almost all aspects of social life (Damisch et al., 2010). For instance, sports players create rituals in advance of competition to inoculate themselves against anxiety arising from partly random nature of their experiences (Damisch et al., 2010; Kay et al., 2009). Rituals help individuals gain an illusory control on life transitions (Kay et al., 2009). Individuals perceiving randomness in their environment believe more in ritual efficacy (Legare & Souza, 2014).

The other way to compensate for a lower sense of control is to segregate social groups and highlight the markers of such segmentation. For instance, people with a lower sense of control constantly emphasize the borderlines of their in-group system to instill a perception of a black-and-white world (Kay et al., 2009). Another example is that individuals threatened in their sense of personal control increase their faith in the sociopolitical systems and religious figures and defend in-groups more intensely against out-groups (Kay et al., 2009).

In a similar way, branded consumption provides ways to accommodate needs for a larger 'self" and a more blatant structure of segmentation among consumers. On one hand, branded

consumption helps establish a 'larger' self via self-brand connection. Status consumption of branded products offers reassurance among the middle-class because it addresses a variety of psychological needs connected to 'self' (Fussell, 1992; Bourdieu, 1984). Individuals with less cultural capital desire for products that indicate material abundance which may enhance a cultural perception of 'self' (Holt, 1998). On the other hand, brands communicate desired identities and qualities (Veblen, 1899; Belk, 1988; Holt, 1998; Soloman, 1983). Branded consumption differentiates the consumers of a focal brand from the consumers of a non-focal brand based on different brand personalities. For example, consumers prefer certain brand signals when they feel their cultural capital about brands could differentiate more from others (Berger & Ward, 2010). Furthermore, brand personality is considered to be an integral part of brand equity (Aaker & Fourier, 1995) because it further differentiates brands from each other (Crask & Laskey, 1990). In fact, consumers often need the meanings conveyed via brands to differentiate their 'self' from others (Belk, 1988, 2013). Brand offerings (such as brand personality and brand logos) enrich the personal meaning of a brand attached to consumers (Levy, 1959; Belk, 1988, 2013). Brands also instill a deeper layer of meaning which is exclusively perceived by a particular group of consumers (Rook, 1999). In return, ritual consumption enhances consumers' purchase intention for branded products (Liu et al., 2022).

The above research implies that a clearly defined brand personality and a strong perception of brand-consumer connection could help differentiate in-groups from out-group among a brand's customer base. Thus, we wonder if branded consumption would boost a sense of differentiation of in-groups from out-groups and as a result, strengthen a sense of structure in the consumption environment. Brand logos, as an integral part of branded consumption, represent brand personality and other associated qualities of a brand (Aaker & Fourier, 1995). Therefore, we posit that brand logos, as a crucial element of branded consumption, facilitate such a differentiation process among consumer groups. As a result of reinforcing a 'larger' self, it helps restore a sense of non-randomness among low-control consumers. In addition, brand logos function as markers of one's perceived brand boundaries (Aaker & Fourier, 1995). Clearly defined intangible boundaries in one's environment are shown to enhance meanings of objects to individuals (Cwerner & Metcalfe, 2003; Ger & Yenicioglu, 2004). As a result, consumers who seek non-randomness from outside world prefer bordered over non-bordered products for boosting their sense of order and structure (Cutright, 2012). Analogically, we posit that people may perceive explicit (vs. implicit) brand logos as more effective markers of segmented consumer groups. In other words, explicit brand logos are more instrumental than implicit logos in restoring a sense of non-randomness. We state our prediction formally below.

H1: Consumers prefer explicit over implicit brand logos as their sense of personal control decreases.

To demonstrate what the explicitness of brand logos refers to in retailing contexts, we include a few examples in the Appendix.

Following the theoretical arguments above, we further predict that purchase of branded products with explicit (vs. implicit) logos will help restore a sense of personal control among consumers who experience a loss of control.

H2: After consumption of the branded products with explicit (vs. implicit) logos, consumers with a priory low sense of personal control will reduce their need for personal control (i.e., their sense of control is restored via branded consumption).

Attribution process and compensatory control strategy

The attribution process has been examined as a major mechanism underlining a myriad of human behavior (e.g., Kelley et al., 1980; Jones et al., 1971). Consumers' preference and judgements about products, services, other consumers often differ depending on their internal and external attribution process (e.g., Samper et al., 2018; Chen & Tabari, 2017; Hur et al., 2015)

When facing a loss of control, people tend to either attribute internally or externally, i.e., the loss of control is caused by oneself or others/external situations. Self-causality may work independently from self-contingency among people with low control (Rothbaum et al., 1982; Rotter, 1966) and accordingly, internal vs. external attribution may lead to different coping strategies among people. Prior research documents that internal attribution about loss of control may lead to inward behavior such as withdrawal, submissiveness, and passivity (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Inward behavior could facilitate inward communication to people themselves that they know what would happen as an outcome in the future. Putting in the other way, the inward behavior above is actually a sign of relinquished perceived control (Rothbaum et al., 1982). This suggests that people may show their cooperation with the negative outcome to achieve an adapted sense of control. Echoing this line of argument, individuals intimidated by a loss of control often seek system-justification (e.g., Cutright et al., 2011). The need for justifying the incumbent system could be strong enough to override the need for self-esteem (Jost & Banaji, 1994). For example, individuals accredit the negative stereotyping about themselves to something unavoidable and believe the sufferings are deserved to achieve a kind of comfort (Jost & Banaji, 1994). This suggests that under some circumstances, lower-status groups could stay with the status quo and persist in explaining and justifying the social system. When people attribute the loss of control to limited personal ability, they may behave more inwardly (Rotter, 1966; Cohen et al., 1976). In addition, branded consumption may boost a perception of personal control by signaling inwardly a sense of order (Rothbaum et al., 1982). Relating the implications above to the current research, we wonder if consumers who experience a low sense of personal control would prefer implicit (vs. explicit) brand logos which minimize the signaling of self-brand connection thus help consumers achieve a relinquished, adapted sense of control.

Extant consumer research documents preference for subtle (vs. explicit) signals as a result of internal attribution about external situations, which aligns with our theorizing. Cutright and others (2011) document different strategies that people take to justify their system according to the extent to which they believe in their system. When the system within which people live is threatened, they will adopt either indirect/subtle or direct/explicit approaches to defend their system contingent

on their confidence in the legitimacy of their system. Compared to direct/explicit approaches, indirect/subtle means are more ambiguous and are not as easily detectable by others. They are exemplified as making an anonymous donation, purchasing items manufactured by system-supporting business but do not advertise publicly, and preferring products which satisfy subtle self-expression rather than screaming out brand statements in the purchased products (e.g., Cutright et al., 2011). In short, the differential extent to which consumers believe in their system would influence the approaches that consumers adopt to justify their system. Similarly, people may differ in the way of restoring a sense of personal control contingent upon how much they believe in their own role in the situation. When they attribute loss of control internally (vs. externally), they may tend to believe less (vs. more) that they should bring the environment in line with their wishes. Therefore, we posit that consumers' branded consumption, as part of their copying strategy to address a control threat, would also differ depending on whether they make internal or external attributions about the loss of control.

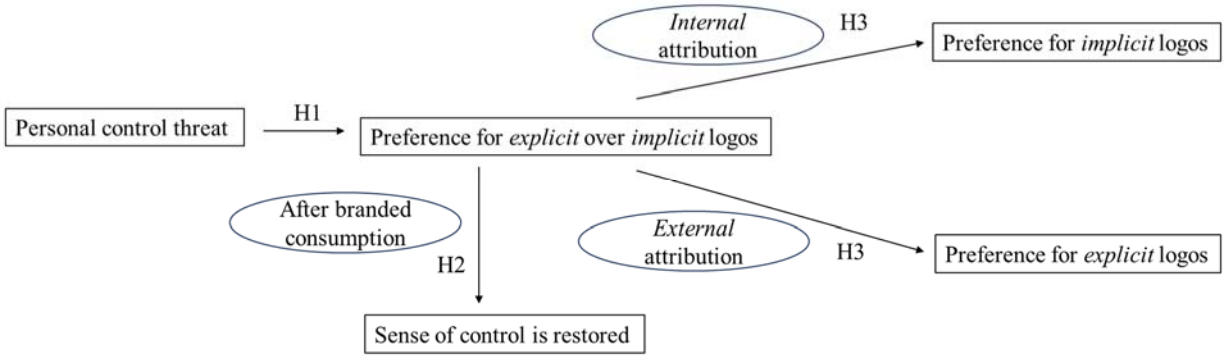
How would subtle signals help consumers to restore a sense of control? Extant research suggests that subtle signals help minimizing differentiation. Berger and Ward (2010) documents that consumers sometimes would prefer inconspicuous consumption rather than conspicuous consumption exemplified by explicit logos to avoid being differentiated by wealth and style etc. Echoing in the research of self-esteem, differentiation tends to be minimized by low-esteem consumers. Lowered self-esteem makes people go for most or least challenging tasks instead of those in the middle ground since the most or least challenging tasks cannot easily differentiate personal capability (Rothbaum, 1981; Rothbaum et al., 1982; Atkinson, 1957, 1964; Trope & Brickman, 1975). Rothbaum and others (1982) suggest that people who compromised their sense of control over the environment become more concerned about reducing the possibility of disappointment than enhancing the possibility of future success. Combining the implications above, we posit that subtle signals (exemplified by implicit brand logos) may be more instrumental to low-control consumers who make internal attributions about their loss of control by 1) minimizing segmentation and reducing further division among consumer groups, 2) avoiding anxiety of exposing 'self' via explicit brand logos to a broader audience and 3) creating inconvenience for others to interpret their 'self' which are manifested through their branded consumption.

We state our prediction formally as follows.

H3: *Consumers would prefer implicit (vs. explicit) brand logos when they make internal (vs. external) attributions about a loss of personal control*.

We summarize our predictions above in Figure 1.

Figure 1.
Conceptual model



A control driven versus self-esteem driven account

One possible confounded explanation for the predicted effect is that preference for explicit brand logos could also be driven by the need to enhance self-esteem among consumers who experience a loss of control. One way to disentangle the effect driven by a need for self-esteem from the need for a sense of order is to test the effect in both inconspicuous and conspicuous consumptions. If the preference for explicit logos is a control driven effect, the effect predicted in H1 would remain regardless branded consumption is inconspicuous or conspicuous. For consumers who are motivated to restore their inner sense of order and structure, inward signaling via branded consumption matters more than outward signaling. In contrast, if preference for explicit logos is driven by a need for self-esteem, such preference would disappear when branded consumption is not conspicuous.

We formally state the predictions as below.

H4a: Consumers under a loss of control will prefer explicit (vs. implicit) brand logos in both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumptions (i.e., a control-driven account of the effect).

H4b: Consumers under a loss of control will prefer explicit (vs. implicit) brand logos more in conspicuous than inconspicuous consumptions (i.e., a self-esteem account of the effect).

Summary of propositions, theoretical contribution, and managerial implications

In summary, we hypothesize that when consumers are under a threat to personal control, they will generally seek more structure and order in their environment and will prefer explicit over implicit brand logos which facilitate signaling a structured consumption world. In other words, branded consumption of logos would help restore consumers' sense of personal control. Thus, we further predict that consumers' need for structure and non-randomness will decrease once they purchase branded products with explicit logos. Since coping behavior often differ among people who make internal (vs. external) attributions about a situation, we posit that low-control consumers' preference for explicit (vs. implicit) brand logos will be attenuated when they make internal (vs. external) attributions about the loss of control. Specifically, we predict that subtle signals (i.e.,

implicit brand logos) are more preferred by those consumers who make internal attribution about their loss of personal control. To disentangle this effect from a possibly confounded need to enhance self-esteem among low-control consumers, we suggest testing the effect in both conspicuous and inconspicuous consumptions. In line with our argument for a control-driven account of the effect, we expect that preference for explicit over implicit logos among low-control consumers will be consistent regardless of whether their branded consumptions are conspicuous or inconspicuous.

The empirical studies arising from the proposed theoretical framework aim to examine the role of branded consumption in restoring consumers' sense of control over external situations. The current research has the potential to make contributions in the following way. First, the proposed conceptual model adds to Terror Management Theory (TMT) by offering a novel solution through branded consumption. Second, it adds to personal control literature by delineating the novel behavioral consequences among consumers who are experiencing a loss of personal control. Third, as external situations shift quickly and create life challenges, consumers often experience a threat to their personal control. Business practitioners are constantly seeking ways of empowering consumers with innovative brand offerings. Therefore, the need to understand consumers' coping behavior in consumption contexts is quite compelling. Current research helps brand managers and other marketing practitioners to explore ways of empowering consumers with brand offerings during difficult times.

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Appendix

Examples of explicit and implicit brand logos

Product	*Explicit brand logos*	*Implicit brand logos*
Coca-cola ® Bottle bank		
IKEA® Laundry bag		

Note. The products above are not the real products available in the market. They are examples only for illustration purposes.

Acknowledgments
Not applicable.

Funding
Not applicable.

Conflict of Interests
No, there are no conflicting interests.